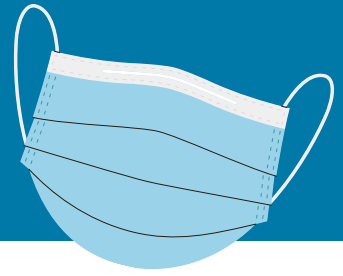# Why do people wear masks?

Even though we are no longer required to wear masks because of COVID, some people still wear masks for many reasons. Learn about why people may choose to wear masks and how masking can protect them and their communities.

→ To cope with air pollution

What is air pollution?

Air pollution is a mixture of particles and chemicals (called pollutants) in the air that can affect your health. Air pollution levels are often higher in cities than in rural areas.
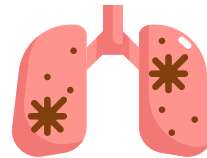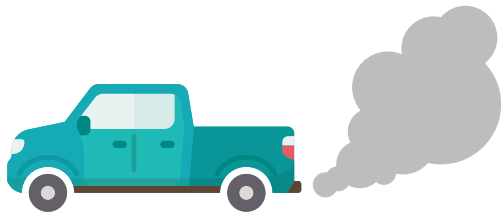
Air pollutants can include:
- Exhaust from cars, trucks, trains, ships, and buses
- Chemicals from factories
- Smoke from fires or cigarettes
- Dust

Breathing in air pollution can lead to health problems, such as:
- Respiratory (breathing) diseases
- Cancers like lung cancer
- Heart disease

Air pollution can also make symptoms worse for people with certain conditions, such as:
- Asthma
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Heart disease

How can a mask help?

A mask can block particles in air pollution from going into your nose, mouth, and lungs.

When the air quality is unhealthy (meaning there is a lot of air pollution), you may see people wearing face masks. They may do this to lower their chance of getting certain health problems, or because they have a condition that will get worse if they breathe in air pollution.
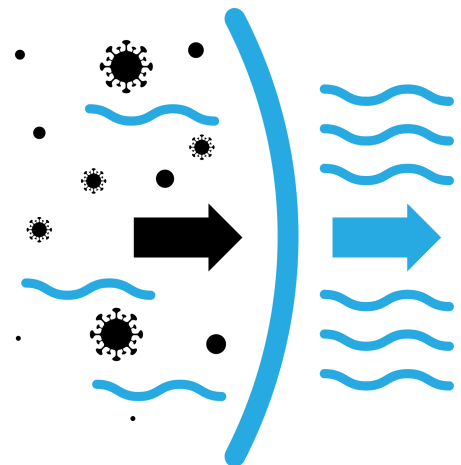
To help with allergies

What causes allergies?

Allergies are caused by **allergens**, which are anything that can cause an allergic reaction. Some allergens can be in the air, such as:

- Dust
- Pollen
- Mold
- Pet dander

How can a mask help?

Masks may block allergens in the air from getting into your nose, throat, and lungs.

People with allergies may wear them when pollen counts are high, or they are visiting a place with animals.

To protect others if they are sick

People may wear masks when they are sick to help protect others around them.

Illnesses such as a cold, the flu, or COVID can spread by droplets released into the air by speaking, coughing, or sneezing. Masks may stop these particles from spreading to others who are nearby, lowering their chance of getting sick too.

To protect themselves if others are sick

People may also wear masks to protect themselves from getting sick. In the same way that masks protect others, they can protect the people wearing them.

❯ Learn more

To learn about air pollution and your health, visit:
niehs.nih.gov/health/topics/agents/air-pollution/

To learn more about how masks can protect you and others, visit:
cdc.gov/niosh/topics/publicppe/community-ppe.html

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